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ABSTRACT

This paper is an analysis of the ongoing work of philosopher Jacques Derrida and the immense body of work associated with him. Derrida's copious work is difficult to categorize since Derrida challenges the very concept that meaning can be grasped in its original moment or that meaning can be represented in the form of some proper, self-identical concept. Derrida's "deconstruction" requires reading, writing, and translating Derrida, an impossibility the author maintains cannot be done because translation involves transformation and the originality of the original only comes into view after it has been translated. The sections of the paper include: (1) "Preface: Reading Derrida, Writing after Derrida"; (2) "Curriculum Vitae"; (3) "(No) Philosophy"; (4) "The Myth of the Origin"; (5) "The Presence of the Voice"; (6) "The Ubiquity of Writing"; (7) "Difference and 'Differance'"; (8) "Deconstruction and the Other"; (9) "Education"; (10) "Education beyond Representation: Gregory Ulmer's 'Post(e)-pedagogy'"; and (11) "Afterword: Education as the Possibility of Justice." (EH)

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by Gert J. J. Biesta

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Education as the Possibility of Justice: Jacques Derrida[1]

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Education as the Possibility of Justice: Jacques Derrida

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EWALD: Is there a philosophy of Jacques Derrida?
DERRIDA: No.
EWALD: Therefore there is no message?
DERRIDA: No message.
EWALD: Is there any normativity?
DERRIDA: Of course there is, that's all there is.
(Derrida & Ewald 1995:289)

1 Preface: Reading Derrida, Writing After Derrida

In more than one sense this is an impossible chapter.

To begin with the obvious: its subject, Jacques Derrida, has since the sixties published numerous articles and more than 35 books (see Bennington & Derrida 1993:355-416; Nordquist 1995), and continues to write 'at a speed that is a little intimidating for his readers' (Bennington 1993:3). Any attempt to represent such a corpus, not to mention the colossal tower of interpretations it has evoked, is simply destined to fail.

Also, Derrida's work is complex and difficult to read. Derrida writes about, with, against and in/on the margins of the texts of major thinkers in the Western tradition -- such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Freud and Heidegger, 'the thinker who Derrida almost obsessively interprets and reinterprets' (Bernstein 1992:173) -- both explicitly and between the lines. Derrida's writing often breaks with the conventional, linear presentation of philosophical argument and contains multiple experiments with typography, punctuation and pictorial form (eg *Glas*; Derrida 1987a; see also 'Tympan' in Derrida 1982; 'Survivre' in Derrida 1986a). But even when

his writing does take a more conventional shape, it is still full of word play, punning, allusion and parody, thereby setting all kinds of traps and obstacles for its readers.

However, the problem of writing about Derrida is not just a technical one. It is not just the problem of finding a way to represent a corpus that can hardly be represented because of its scale. It is not just the problem of conveying the original meaning of an oeuvre that is complex and unconventional. For it is precisely the assumption that meaning can be grasped in its original moment, that meaning can be represented in the form of some proper, self-identical concept, that Derrida is most determinedly out to challenge.

This helps to understand why Derrida's writing is often unconventional and oblique. Derrida's writing is a 'writing on writing' (cf Derrida 1983:45) -- 'but you know I never write *on* anything ... I seek above all to produce effects (on you)' (Derrida quoted in Kamuf 1991:xix) -- which does not want to betray itself, which does not want to restore the kind of order it puts into question. At the very same time, however, it is precisely this which makes writing *about* Derrida into a Catch 22, because getting Derrida 'right,' that is giving the final representation of the original meaning of his oeuvre, is at the very same time *not* getting him right.

But this Catch-22 is not simply the last word about Derrida and *deconstruction* -- 'I use this word for the sake of a rapid convenience, though it is a word I have never liked and one whose fortune has disagreeably surprised me' (Derrida 1983:44), 'however, as time passes, and when I see so many people trying to get rid of this word, I ask myself whether there is not perhaps something in it' (Derrida 1996:85). For we might argue that the very *im*possibility of getting Derrida right is precisely what opens up the possibility of writing about Derrida in the first place (see Bennington 1993:15, 38). At this stage we can at least imagine that if our writing were to be identical with Derrida's writing, it would be impossible to recognize it as writing about Derrida. For one thing, it would not even count as writing about Derrida. In order to re-present Derrida's writing, in order to say the same thing as he says, in order to capture his writing in its singularity, we are therefore obliged to say something different. As we will see later on, it is precisely this possibility of 'repetition in alterity' (*iterability*) which Derrida identifies as a necessary possibility of writing in general (see for example Derrida 1988) (which means, that all writing is itself always already contaminated by

alterity so that 'three is the first figure of repetition'; Derrida 1978:299).

Both among followers and critics of Derrida there are those who have taken this to mean that deconstruction is a kind of 'hermeneutics free-for-all' (Norris 1987:139), a joyous release from all the rules and constraints of interpretation and understanding (see for example Habermas 1988:222-223; and for Derrida's reply Derrida 1988:156-157). This idea has especially been influential in the adoption of Derrida's work in American literary criticism, and through this, it has influenced the general image of what deconstruction is 'about'. But this interpretation, which suggests that deconstruction is basically a *sceptical* position, overlooks a crucial 'movement' in Derrida's writing (see for example Derrida 1988:137).

It is true, that Derrida has challenged the common understanding of writing and reading as two oppositional 'activities', one actively producing, the other passively consuming. Derrida points to a certain complicity between writing and reading, in that -- to put it simply -- a text needs to be read in order to be (or become) a text. This implies that writing always entails a *risk*: the risk of misunderstanding. Derrida has articulated this risk in different ways, for example by arguing that no author can ever fully master the way in which his writing will be read, or that no text, not even the text of the law (which dreams of doing so) prescribes an inevitable reading (see Bennington 1993:167).

If this were all there is to say, it might be correct to conclude that Derrida simply wants to invert the opposition between understanding and misunderstanding, so that the latter would henceforth take priority over the former and would thereby become the rule or the law. But this interpretation overlooks the fact that Derrida has not just questioned the possibility of understanding as such, but first and foremost the way in which we conceive of the relationship between understanding and misunderstanding itself.

This relationship is commonly understood as a *binary opposition*, an opposition of two, mutually exclusive options. The opposition implies a *hierarchy* in that understanding is considered to be the normal situation and misunderstanding the aberration. Understanding thus defines what 'real' or 'successful' reading is, while misunderstanding is conceived as the distortion of this normal situation, a distortion that comes from without. As soon as it is acknowledged, however, that misunderstanding is *always* possible (which is not the same as saying that it is always the case), we need to ask whether we can still hold that misunderstanding constitutes an accident, that it is a

risk that befalls language from without. According to Derrida this is *not* the case. He argues that misunderstanding is as much a part of language, is as much on the 'inside' of language as understanding is (Derrida 1988:15-17).

> The relation of 'mis' (mis-understanding, mis-interpreting, for example) to that which is not 'mis' is ... that of a *general possibility inscribed in* the structure of positivity, of normality, of the 'standard'. (Derrida 1988:157)

If this is so, then it follows that the idea of normal language as successful understanding is not a fact but rather an 'ethical and teleological determination' of what normal language is (Derrida 1988:17), which means that the purity of normal language can only be maintained by an act of exclusion. This not only reveals that what one tries to keep outside of language (misunderstanding) inhabits the inside; Derrida also holds that there would not even be an inside without that fact (see Bennington 1993:217). We might say, therefore, that the term excluded by the binary divide returns in some sense to sign the act of its own exclusion. And, even more important, that this apparent complicity is precisely what outlaws the legality of this exclusion in the first place (see Bennington 1993:217-218; see also Derrida 1981a:41-42).

All this suggests that deconstruction is far from an attempt to simply make misunderstanding the rule or the law. To quote Derrida once more:

> All that I recall is that this *structural possibility* [of misunderstanding; G.B.] must be taken into account when describing so-called normality, or so-called just comprehension or interpretation, and that this possibility can be neither *excluded nor opposed.* An entirely different logic is called for. (Derrida 1988:157; emph. in original)

If we try to think along the lines -- but is it linear? -- of this entirely different logic, we can see that for Derrida the condition of possibility of language is neither to be found in 'pure' understanding nor in 'pure' misunderstanding. He also rejects, however, the option of some higher unity (*Aufhebung*) of understanding and misunderstanding, as a dialectical interpretation of his writing would suggest (see Derrida 1981a:40-41). What Derrida wants to bring into view is the ultimate *undecidability* of this opposition (which does not imply a denial of the difference between understanding and misunderstanding; see Derrida 1988:156); an undecidability which cannot be traced back to some original, pure unity, but which itself is always already 'at work'. Here we encounter the entirely different logic of 'the originarity of the secondary' (Bennington 1993:40), it is the logic of the 'supplement' (Derrida 1976:269-316), the logic of 'différance' (Derrida 1982:1-

28).

Having said all this, we are now in a better position to grasp the role of misunderstanding -- the need to say something different if we want to say the same -- in our writing about Derrida. Derrida has made us first of all aware of the fact that we are not in a position to *choose* between (pure) understanding and (pure) misunderstanding because the former is always already contaminated by the latter. Misunderstanding is the essential and hence necessary risk of all understanding. There is only one way to evade this risk, which is *not* to engage in an act of reading or interpretation at all. While this might be the only way to be absolutely respectful of the singularity of Derrida's writing (and singular it indeed is), it makes this singularity opaque, silent, unidentifiable and unrecognizable at the very same time. Such a singular would then be a failure in its own terms. This means that for the singular to be possible as a singularity, it must take the risk of a 'repetition in alterity' (Bennington 1993:86), the risk of misunderstanding, the risk of *translation* -- 'and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*' (Derrida 1981a:20). Only this repetition in alterity opens up the possibility for the singular to be recognized in its irreducible singularity. Otherwise the ineluctably singular would be walled up and reduced to silence. Here we encounter 'the law of singularity', the inevitable dissingularization of the singular through the repetition without which it could not hope to secure its singularity (see Gasché 1994:14-15).

Reading Derrida and writing about Derrida therefore means translating Derrida -- 'and the question of deconstruction is also through and through *the* question of translation' (Derrida 1991:270). Translation, Derrida holds, is not the transmission or reproduction of an original meaning that preceded it. Not only because every translation is a possible transformation, but also, and even more, because the originality of the original only comes into view *after* it has been translated (which in turn means that the very sense of a pure original preceding translation is but an effect of translation; see Derrida 1985; cf Wigley 1993:1-33). Translation, then, might best be understood as a *response*, a response to the singularity of the text (see Gasché 1994:227-250). For this response to be a genuine response, it has to be *singular* itself (a 'response without norms'; Derrida & Ewald 1995:289), and not just a repetition of the text or a response preprogrammed by the text. This implies that a genuine response has all the allure of

irresponsibility: it is singular, untranslatable, and never an unconditional affirmation. And yet, for a response to be genuine and responsive it also has to be *responsible* in that it needs to do justice to the singularity of the text (not in the least because the survival of the text is dependent on this response). Here, then, we encounter once more the entirely different logic which allows Derrida to argue that a text only lives if it lives *on*,

> and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable... Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language [*langue*]. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. (Derrida 1979:102)

With this entirely different logic Derrida has opened up a new terrain in Western philosophy. What I hope to achieve in this impossible chapter, is to give a sense of this terrain, of why Derrida has opened it up and how he has done it, and, finally, what this might mean for our thinking about education.

2 Curriculum Vitae

> DERRIDA: Ah, you want me to tell you things like "I-was-born-in-El-Biar-in-the-suburbs-of-Algiers-in-a-petit-bourgeois-Jewish-family-which-was-assimilated-but... Is this really necessary? I just couldn't do it, you'll have to help me...
>
> (Wood & Bernasconi 1988:74)

Writing about Derrida's life is just as impossible as writing about Derrida's writing. Of course, the plain facts of his life can be enumerated. But the crucial question is, what these facts actually mean. For one thing, including an account of Derrida's life suggests that knowledge of the origin of the writing which bears his signature can help us to understand the meaning of this writing. As will become clear further on in this chapter, it is precisely this line of argument that is under scrutiny in Derrida's writing. It is because of this, that Derrida has for a long time been reluctant to give information about his 'personal' life, which is for example illustrated by the fact that until 1979 he had done everything he could to avoid public photography (cf Derrida 1995:196-197). Nonetheless, this section contains some 'basic' information of Derrida's 'curriculum vitae' (Bennington 1993:319). Further information can be found in Bennington (1993), Norris (1987), and Oger (1995); see also Derrida (1995).

Jacques Derrida was born as Jackie Derrida on July 15, 1930 in El-Biar near

Algiers (the capital of the French colony of Algeria) of Sephardic-Jewish parents. He attends nursery and primary school at El-Biar. In 1941 he joins the first year at the Lycée de Ben Aknoun near El-Biar. In 1942, on the first day of the school year, he is expelled from school as a result of a recently installed numerous clausus for Jewish pupils. In the spring of 1943 he is enroled at the Lycée Emile-Maupas (Algiers) where Jewish teachers expelled from the public system set up some teaching. From 1943 until 1947 he returns to the Lycée de Ben Aknoun. He fails his *baccalauréat* in June 1947. There follows a period with intense readings of Rousseau, Gide, Nietzsche, Valéry, Camus. In 1948 he attains his *baccalauréat* after which he is enroled at the Lycée Bugeaud for further studies in philosophy (Derrida reads Bergson, Sartre, Kierkegaard and Heidegger) and literature.

In 1949 he moves to France and becomes a boarding student at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris. Here he undertakes intense reading of Simone Weil and the 'existentialists', and of Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Bataille, Blanchot and others. In 1950 he fails the entrance exam to the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS). After another two years at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand (among the other students are Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Serres) he is admitted to the ENS in 1952. Here he studies with Hegel scholar Jean Hyppolite and becomes friends with the director of studies and his later colleague Louis Althusser, and with Michel Foucault, whose lectures he attends. In 1956 he passes the *agrégation* (an examination which qualifies successful candidates for higher teaching posts and guarantees the candidate a state job for life). He receives a grant for a one-year visiting scholarship at Harvard. In Boston he marries Marguerite Aucouturier. They will have two sons.

From 1957 until 1959 (in the middle of the Algerian war) Derrida fulfils his military service. He teaches French and English in a school for soldier's children in Koléa, near Algiers. In 1959 he returns to France where he has his first teaching post at the *lycée* in Le Mans. From 1960 until 1964 he teaches general philosophy and logic at the Sorbonne (Paris) as an assistant of Bachelard, Canguilhem, Ricœur and Wahl. His first publications appear in the journals *Critique* and *Tel Quel*. In 1962 he publishes a translation of and introduction to Edmund Husserl's *L'Origine de la géométrie*. In 1964 he takes up a teaching post at the ENS, invited there by Hyppolite and Althusser, where he is to remain until 1984. Derrida is currently Director of Studies at the *Ecole des*

Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris) and Professor of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine.

In 1967 Derrida published three books: *La Voix et le phénomène Speech and Phenomena*, 1973), *De la grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*, 1976), and *L'Ecriture et la différence* (*Writing and Difference*, 1978). In 1972 another three books appeared, *Positions* (*Positions*, 1981), *La Dissémination* (*Dissemination*, 1982), and *Marges de la philosophie* (*Margins of Philosophy*, 1984). Since then, Derrida has published numerous articles and books, most of which are available in English translation. His major bookpublications include *Glas* (1986, French original 1974), *The Archeology of the Frivolous* (1980, 1976), *Spurs* (1979, 1978), *The Truth in Painting* (1987, 1978), *The Post Card* (1987, 1980), *The Ear of the Other* (1985, 1982), *Signéponge* (1983, 1983), *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (1989, 1987), *Limited Inc.* (1988), *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1992, 1991), *The Other Heading* (1992, 1991), *The Gift of Death* (1995, 1992), *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994* (1995, 1992), *Specters of Marx* (1994, 1993). A translation of *Du Droit à la Philosophie* (1990), which contains essays, lectures, interviews, and letters on pedagogical issues, especially concerning the teaching of philosophy, written in the seventies up to the mid-eighties at what was the height of Derrida's involvement with GREPH, the *Groupe de Recherches sur l'Enseignement Philosophique* (Research Group on the Teaching of Philosophy) (see Derrida 1986c), is still awaited.

3 (No) philosophy

> Since we have already said everything, the reader must bear with us if we continue on a while. If we extend ourselves by force of play. If we then *write* a bit: on Plato, who already said in the *Phaedrus* that writing can only repeat (itself), that is "always signifies (*sēmainei*) the same" and that it is a "game" (*paidia*). (Derrida 1981b:65)

In this section I will -- in a sense -- repeat what I have been saying about Derrida and deconstruction in the preface of this chapter. My aim is not to give an exhaustive overview of Derrida's writing. I will just present one possible reading of Derrida's writing, which, by no means, is the only way to 'cross' this writing. I will begin with that which Derrida's writing is aimed at (logocentrism). I will then discuss the way in

which this aim is 'approached' (deconstruction). Next, I will present that which comes 'after' the deconstruction of logocentrism (nothing, that is, everything, that is, *différance*), in order, finally, to connect this with the reason *why* Derrida is 'doing all this' (justice).

3.1 The myth of the origin

The theme that runs through Derrida's writing right from the beginning is the theme of the *origin*. Or, to be more precise: the theme of the thought of the origin, the theme of writing about the origin, the theme of the philosophy of the origin, the theme, in short, of what is called *metaphysics*.

Derrida claims that the history of Western philosophy, a history which reaches down from Plato to the present, is one continuous attempt to locate a fundamental ground, a fixed permanent centre, an Archimedean point, which serves both as an absolute beginning and as a centre from which everything originating from it can be mastered and controlled. An origin which 'closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible' (Derrida 1978:279).

Derrida further argues that since Plato this origin has always been defined of in terms of *presence*. The origin is thought of as fully present to itself and as totally self-sufficient. In this respect it conforms to the logic of *identity*, which laws specify that 'Whatever is, is,' that 'Nothing can both be and not be,' and that 'Everything must either be or not be' (see Lechte 1994:106). The 'determination of Being as *presence*', Derrida holds, is the 'matrix' of the history of metaphysics (which coincides with the history of the West in general) (see Derrida 1978:279)

> It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated an invariable presence -- *eidos, archē, telos, energeia, ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alētheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth. (Derrida 1978:279-280)

This 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida 1978:281) includes more than just the determination of the meaning of Being as presence (including all the sub-determinations which depend on it, such as: presence of the thing to the sight, presence as substance/essence/existence, temporal presence as point of the now or of the moment, the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other

and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego; see Derrida 1976:12). According to Derrida, the metaphysical 'gesture' of Western philosophy includes a *hierarchical axiology* in which the origin is designated as pure, simple, normal, standard, self-sufficient and self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident etcetera.

> All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. (Derrida 1988:93)

This is '*the* metaphysical exigency', that which has been 'the most constant, most profound and most potent' (Derrida 1988:93).

Derrida's writing wants to put this metaphysical gesture into question (but the question of the question is the question of where to begin questioning). He acknowledges that he is not the first to do so. Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger -- to recall the most salient cases -- have all in their own way exposed and criticized the metaphysical desire, the desire for fixed, self-present origins, of Western philosophy (see Derrida 1978:280). But there is a crucial difference between Nietzsche's 'demolition' or Heidegger's 'destruction' of metaphysics and the work Derrida is engaged in. Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and all the other 'destructive discourses' wanted to make a total break with the metaphysical tradition. They wanted to end and to overcome metaphysics. Derrida tells us, however, that such a rupture is not a real possibility.

> There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language ... which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (Derrida 1978:280)

While Derrida definitely wants to 'shake' metaphysics -- which sometimes happens under the name of *deconstruction* -- he acknowledges that this cannot be done from some neutral and innocent place outside of metaphysics. In so far as critique operates through the application of some external criterion, this means that deconstruction is *not* a critique (see Derrida 1991:273; cf Norris 1987:56). What is more to the point, to put it simply, is to say that Derrida wants to shake metaphysics by showing that it is itself always already 'shaking,' by showing, in other words, the impossibility of any of its attempts to fix or immobilize being through the presentation of a self-sufficient, self-

identical presence.

This implies that deconstruction is not something that is applied to the texts of the metaphysical tradition from the outside. It is, therefore, 'not a method and cannot be transformed into one' (Derrida 1991:273). Rather

> "deconstructions," which I prefer to use in its plural form ... is one of the possible names to designate, in short by metonymy, what occurs [*ce qui arrive*], or cannot manage to occur [*ce qui n'arrive pas à arriver*], namely a certain dislocation which in effect reiterates itself regularly -- and everywhere where there is something rather than nothing (Derrida & Ewald 1995:287-288).

To which we need to add that 'all sentences of the type "deconstruction is X" or "deconstruction is not X" *a priori* miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false' (Derrida 1991:275).

What Derrida attempts to show in his readings of the texts of the Western tradition, is that any presentation of a self-sufficient, self-identical presence -- which is what Western philosophy has been doing under the name of 'metaphysics' throughout its history -- can only be done with the 'help' of that which is excluded by this presence. He attempts to show, in other words, that presence can not present itself, but needs the 'help' of what is not present, of absence. This puts the non-present in a kind of double position (Derrida describes it as a 'folding back of opposition within the series'; Derrida 1981b:104). On the one hand the non-present is what is totally different from what is present. And yet the presence *upon which its definition depends* can itself only be articulated with the help of that what it is not. (I will provide examples of this general formulation in a moment.)

We might say, therefore, that presence needs a *supplement* in order to articulate itself as presence. But this supplement (and here Derrida plays on the double meaning of supplement as that which is added on, and that which substitutes for and supplants) is not totally different from, and totally outside of what it supplements. It is not a supplement that supervenes upon some natural, original, self-sufficient presence. This would be the metaphysical understanding of the supplement, an understanding relying on the logic of *identity*. What Derrida reveals in the texts of the metaphysical tradition, however, are traces of a logic of *supplementarity*. This logic, he writes, would have it 'that the outside be inside ... that what adds itself to something takes the place of a default in the thing, that the default, as the outside of the inside, should be already

within the inside, etc.' (Derrida 1976:215). It is a logic that raises the question of an *originary supplement*, 'if this absurd expression may be risked, totally unacceptable as it is within classical logic' (Derrida 1976:313).

3.2 The presence of the voice

One of the most pervasive ways in which the metaphysics of presence has been (and presumably still is) present in Western philosophy, is in the form of the privileging of voice as the medium of meaning and the consequent dismissal of writing as derivative and inessential. This order is based upon a rather straightforward logic in which spoken words are seen as the symbols of mental experience, and written words as the symbols of spoken words. The priority of spoken language over written or silent language stems from the fact that when words are spoken the speaker and the listener are supposed to be simultaneously present to one another. Writing, on the other hand, is considered to be subversive in so far as it creates a spatial and temporal distance between the author and audience. Derrida refers to the privilege of the voice of writing as *phonocentrism*. *Phonocentrism*, he argues, is in a sense a 'necessity', in that it is a phenomenon that not only occurs in Western culture, but can also be found in the Far East and other cultures (see Derrida 1984:155-116). What is, however, a 'uniquely Western phenomenon' is the translation of phonocentrism into a metaphysical system which assigns the origin of truth to speech or *logos* (Derrida 1976:3). Derrida discusses this specifically Western response to the 'phonocentric necessity' (Derrida 1984:155), this 'epoch of full speech' (Derrida 1976:43) of which we glimpse the *closure* but certainly not the *end* (Derrida 1976:4, 12) under the name of *logocentrism* (see Derrida 1983:40).

The deconstruction of logocentrism occupies a central place in Derrida's 'earlier' writings, most notably the three 1967 volumes (*Speech and Phenomena*, *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*) and the three 1972 volumes (*Dissemination*, *Margins of Philosophy*, *Positions*). In these volumes Derrida raises the question whether it is possible to articulate the presence of speech (or speech as presence) in such a way that it is self-sufficient, simple, identical with and present to itself; in such a way, in short, that it is pure and uncontaminated by what it is not, namely writing. The way in which Derrida tackles this question is a good example of what I have stated above in more general terms -- although it is, of course, more than just an example, as the very

foundation of Western metaphysics is at stake.

'Plato's Pharmacy', a long section in *Dissemination*, takes up the question of the priority of speech over writing in the form of a close reading -- although a reading that 'slips away' from all received models of textual commentary and interpretation -- of Plato's dialogue the *Phaedrus* (see Derrida 1981b:61-171). In this dialogue, Plato recounts the myth of the Egyptian King Thamus to whom there comes a visitor, a god named Theuth, believed to have invented, among other things, the art of writing. Theuth makes the offer of writing as a gift to King Thamus -- 'my invention is a recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom' (Derrida 1981b:75) -- but the latter rejects it. He (and Plato apparently agrees) considers writing a dangerous gift, as it substitutes mere inscriptions for the authentic and immediate presence of spoken language. According to King Thamus, writing poses a threat to the powers of memory, to the 'unaided powers to call things to mind' (Derrida 1981b:102). It also subverts the authority of the teacher, because, as the King says, 'pupils will be widely read without the benefit of a teacher's instruction' (a 'benefit' which undoubtedly has to do with the ability to control the transmission of the truth from one generation to the next) (see Derrida 1981b:102).

Plato's text presents itself as an attempt to articulate the priority of speech over writing and to show the philosophical, moral and political dangers of thinking to invert that priority. What Derrida's reading of the *Phaedrus* reveals, however, is precisely the failure of the text to achieve what it argues. Most obvious in this respect is, of course, the fact that Plato argues for the inferior character of writing by means of writing itself. (Here we should also recall the relationship between Socrates, who never committed any of his thoughts to writing, and Plato, to whom fell the dubious honour of preserving the teacher's wisdom by the only means available, namely writing. See also Derrida 1987b.) This predicament, which repeats itself wherever philosophy refuses to acknowledge its own textual status and aspires to a pure contemplation of truth, it is a common pattern in the history of Western thought, for which reason we might say that logocentrism is first of all 'the desire *not to recognize* this order of necessity' (Norris 1987:127).

The contradiction entailed in 'writing to denounce writing' is not the only 'level' in the *Phaedrus* where Derrida encounters the inability to keep speech and writing apart and thereby the hierarchical order in its place. A further example is found in the Greek

word *pharmakon*, which, as writing is presented as a *pharmakon*, plays a central role in Plato's text. Derrida notes that *pharmakon* can be translated both as 'remedy' or 'cure' and as 'poison' (an ambivalence of which Plato was aware; see Derrida 1981b:99,153). Contrary to the logocentric tendency to the fix the meaning of a word (which would imply to translate it *either* as remedy or as poison), Derrida argues that the two antithetical senses of the word are everywhere *co*-present in Plato's text. Writing is *both* a poison and a cure. It is a poison in that it is a threat to the living presence of spoken language; and yet it is also a cure or remedy in that it is an indispensable means for anyone who wants to preserve or record that presence. Although writing is a supplement to phonetic speech, it is a supplement 'that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it' (Derrida 1981b:110). It therefore is a *dangerous* supplement. But it is not dangerous because it supplements in the 'traditional' sense of the word, but because 'its slidings slip out of the simple alternative presence/absence' (Derrida 1981b:109).

This subversion becomes even more clear in a passage where Socrates is asked to define 'the form of wisdom that is superior to anything acquired from written texts'. After having denounced writing as the 'false brother' of true wisdom and knowledge, Socrates presents the 'brother of this brother, the legitimate one' as itself a kind of writing, namely the '*inscription* of truth in the soul' (see Derrida 1981b:148-149). It is remarkable, Derrida notes,

> that the so-called living discourse should suddenly be described by a "metaphor" borrowed from the order of the very thing one is trying to exclude from it' (Derrida 1981b:148).

And yet, Derrida argues, the translation of the distinction between writing and speech into an opposition between two kinds of writing, 'good writing' and 'bad writing' is not an isolated instance, but 'a pattern that will dominate all of Western philosophy' (Derrida 1981b:148). According to this pattern, 'the good one can be designated only through the metaphor of the bad one' -- which shows that 'metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic' (Derrida 1981b:148). This is, of course, a highly ambivalent pattern, because writing, the term that 'organizes' and governs the opposition (and which is therefore outside of the opposition and in a sense its origin), is at the very same time defined by the opposition (which means that it is at once on the inside of the opposition and secondary to it) (cf Derrida 1981b:103-104). It is not

difficult to recognize this pattern as the pattern of the logic of supplementarity.

3.3 The ubiquity of writing

What Derrida reveals in his reading of the *Phaedrus* -- although this is far from the only place in his work where the point is made -- is the impossibility of articulating the opposition between speech and writing as a stable opposition in which speech is the pure and self-sufficient origin and writing its derivative, completely opposite and completely external to speech. What his 'deconstructive reading' makes clear, in other words, is that the presence of speech (as origin) cannot be articulated without the 'help' of that what is thought of and defined as totally different from speech, without the 'help' of what is absent.

It will be clear from what we have seen so far, that this should not be understood as a plea for the inversion of the opposition between speech and writing. After all, such an inversion would only replace one origin (speech) for another (writing), but would leave the metaphysical order itself, the order of original presence versus derivative absence, in its place. What Derrida attempts to bring into view, is the ultimate *undecidability* of the oppositions that constitute and govern this order (an undecidability which, contrary to Hegelian dialectics, can never be resolved in a 'third term'; see Derrida 1981a:43), and thereby the ultimate *impossibility* of articulating anything whatsoever as a pure, uncontaminated, self-present origin.

And yet there is a sense in which Derrida does argue that 'language is first ... writing' (Derrida 1976:37) -- a sense which immediately follows from the impossibility to grasp a pure, uncontaminated self-present origin. To understand why this is so, we need to follow Derrida in his exposure of logocentrism in the traditional (that is metaphysical) theory of meaning.

According to this theory, meaning is a relation between a word and an object, or, to be more precise, a relation of identity between a sign (or signifier) and something that is signified. This relation is understood in terms of *representation*. The signifier re-presents the signified, or, to be more precise: the signifier re-presents the *presence* of the signified. This implies that the presence of the signified is the origin of and the warrant for the meaning of the signifier. However, in order to serve as origin and warrant, the signified itself has to be *un*signified and *un*represented. It has to be what Derrida calls a

'transcendental signified'. The fact that the traditional theory of meaning depends upon the existence of an unsignified or transcendental signified reveals its logocentric character. As Derrida reminds us,

> I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified (Derrida 1976:49).

But although it is a powerful desire, a desire so powerful that it has been able to exert its influence on almost every corner of Western thought, it is, as Derrida attempts to show again and again, a desire that gets stuck in its own presuppositions. In its most simple form, this is, because for the transcendental signified to be articulated as a presence, as an origin, it needs to be signified. But if this is so, then it follows that 'every signified is also in the position of a signifier' (Derrida 1981a:20), that -- in short -- '*the thing itself is a sign*' (Derrida 1976:49).

According to the phonocentric 'order', speech is a sign of an original presence (for example of a thought), and writing is the signification of speech. The derivative character of writing can therefore be expressed by saying that writing is 'a sign of a sign'. As soon as it is acknowledged that the original, the thing itself is a sign -- which is what Derrida reveals as a consequence of the traditional theory of meaning -- then it follows that even the first act of signification is not the signification of an original but of something which is itself already signified. It follows, in other words, that the first act of signification already operates in the field of the sign of a sign. It is in this ('vulgar') sense that Derrida holds that 'language is first ... writing', although we should immediately add that this is not writing in the traditional, logocentric understanding of the word. Derrida calls it 'arche-writing' (Derrida 1976:56) and refers to the science of this writing as 'Grammatology' (Derrida 1976), under the restriction that 'arche-writing' is not a concept in the traditional sense of a signifier that refers to an unsignified signified, to a presence, and under the restriction that 'Grammatology' is not a science of writing in the traditional sense of science as a writing from a standpoint outside or above the field of writing, and that arche-writing 'cannot and can never be recognized as the *object of a science*', because 'it is that very thing which cannot let itself be reduced to the form of *presence*' (Derrida 1976:57).

3.4 Difference and *différance*

Precisely at this point we encounter one of the most complex dimensions of Derrida's writing -- and we need to say at least a bit about it in order to get a sense of what it is about. The problem, stated simply, is, that as soon as it is acknowledged that there are no simple, unsignified, transcendental signifiers that fix and warrant the meaning of our words, that there are no originals to which our words can refer, we come in a position where even this acknowledgement itself seems to have at once become 'floating'.

The metaphysical tradition had tried to deal with this problem by 'forgetting' the textual status of its own writing, by assuming that it was possible to occupy a place outside of the order of writing. Derrida's writing occurs 'beyond' this naïvité. But he also acknowledges that there cannot be a total rupture, because -- as we have seen before -- such a rupture would deprive us of the very means to 'criticize' metaphysics. Which puts Derrida in the awkward position 'of having to account for an error by means of tools derived from that very error' (Johnson 1981:x).

Derrida tackles this predicament with the help of a theory of signs (semiology) and of language (linguistics) developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, who is considered to be the founder of modern structural linguistics. Contrary to the idea that language is essentially a naming process, attaching words to things, Saussure argues that language is a system, or a structure, where any individual element is meaningless outside the confines of that structure. In language, he holds, there are only *differences*. But -- and here the ideas of Saussure coincide with Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence -- these differences are not differences between 'positive terms', that is between terms that in and by themselves refer to objects or things outside of the system. In language, Saussure argues, there are only differences *without* positive terms.

But if this is so, if there are no positive terms (which is the same as saying that there are no 'transcendental signifieds'), then it follows that we can no longer articulate the differential character of language itself by means of a positive term either. Difference without positive terms implies that this 'dimension' must itself always remain unperceived, for strictly speaking, it is unconceptualisable. It is a difference that cannot be brought back into the order of the same and, through a signifier, given an identity. This means, then, that

the play of difference, which, as Saussure reminded us, is the condition

> for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play. (Derrida 1982:5)

It is 'in and of itself inaudible, in every sense of the word' (Derrida 1982:5).

If, however, we want to articulate that which does not let itself be articulated and yet is the condition for the possibility of all articulation -- which we might at least want to do in order to prevent metaphysics from re-entering the field -- we must first of all acknowledge that there can never be a word or a concept to represent this silent play. We must also acknowledge that this play cannot simply be exposed, for 'one can expose only that which at a certain moment can become *present*' (Derrida 1982:5). And finally we must acknowledge that there is nowhere to begin, 'for what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure' (Derrida 1982:6). All this, and more, is acknowledged in the new 'word' or 'concept' -- 'which is neither a word nor a concept' (Derrida 1982:7) but a 'neographism' (Derrida 1982:13) -- of *différance*. (It should be noted that in French the difference between 'différence' and 'différance' is inaudible, which implies that this neographism is itself already a subversion of phonocentrism.)

The reason why Derrida introduces that 'what is written as *différance*' (Derrida 1982:11) is not difficult to grasp. For although 'the play of difference' is identified as the condition for the possibility of all conceptuality, we should not make the mistake to think that we have finally found the real origin of conceptuality, that, in other words, this play is a playful but nonetheless transcendental signified. Strictly speaking, there is only one way to avoid this mistake, which is by acknowledging that the differences that constitute the play of difference 'are themselves *effects*' (Derrida 1982:11).

> What is written as *différance*, then, will be the playing movement that "produces" -- by means of something that is not simply an activity -- these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* that produces differences is somehow before them, in a simple and unmodified -- in-different -- present. *Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name "origin" no longer suits. (Derrida 1982:11)

Which means, that in the 'most classical fashion', that is in the language of metaphysics, we would have to speak of them as effects 'without a cause' (Derrida 1982:12). Which means *'that différance is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; ... it has neither existence nor essence' (Derrida 1972:6). Most certainly *différance* is not

differentiation, because that would leave open the possibility 'of an organic, original, and homogeneous unity that eventually would come to be divided' (Derrida 1976:13). *Différance* expresses the irreducible 'originary supplement'.

> (E)verything has begun with repetition. Once the centre or the origin have begun by repeating themselves, by redoubling themselves, the double did not only add itself to the simple. It divided it and supplemented it. There was immediately a double origin plus its repetition. Three is the first figure of repetition. (Derrida 1978:299)

Although *différance* is directly related to a structuralist conception of meaning -- which Derrida acknowledges when he says that he sees no reason to question the truth of what Saussure says (Derrida 1976:39), there is one crucial aspect in which *différance* is 'beyond' structuralism. The point here is, that Derrida explicitly denies the original character of structure itself. Structure is *not* a transcendental signified (for which reason Derrida adds that he does not want to question the truth of what Saussure says '*on the level on which he says it*' but does want to question the logocentric way in which Saussure says it; see Derrida 1976). Structure is even less the effect of an original presence preceding and causing it (see Derrida 1978:278-279). What *différance* tries to articulate is the differential character of the 'origin' of structure itself. It is in this sense that we might say that Derrida's writing is poststructural (although we should add that the word 'poststructuralism' was unknown in France 'until its "return" from the United States'; Derrida 1991:272).

3.5 Deconstruction and the other

The preceding pages may have given the impression that deconstruction is a highly 'technical' philosophy and that Derrida's writing is primarily addressed to fellow philosophers. That, in other words, Derrida is a 'philosopher's philosopher' who deals with internal philosophical questions. (Some philosophers would even question, and have actually questioned, whether Derrida's work counts as 'real' philosophy -- which is not too bad for someone holding that the 'central question' of his writing is 'from what site or non-site (*non-lieu*) philosophy [can] as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner'; Derrida 1984:108.) I want to argue, however, that such an interpretation, which would mean that Derrida's writing has no meaning outside of philosophy, or, even stronger, that it is a

politically insignificant form of nihilism, seriously misses the motive, the impetus, or what Richard Bernstein has so aptly described as the *ethico-political horizon* of Derrida's writing (see Bernstein 1992:172-198).

If we want to give this motive a name -- although by now we should be wary about the process of naming -- we might call it a concern for *otherness* or *alterity*. As we have seen, Derrida's writing contrives to dismantle our preconceived notions of identity and expose us to the challenge of hitherto concealed, excluded and suppressed otherness; an otherness which has been ignored in order to preserve the very illusion of self-sufficient identity and presence. His writing reveals that the otherness which is excluded and suppressed in order to maintain the myth of a pure and uncontaminated original presence, is actually constitutive for that which presents itself as pure, self-sufficient, and self-present, and therefore as totally different from this otherness. What the deconstruction of logocentrism reveals, is -- to put it as briefly as possible -- that 'identity *presupposes* alterity' (Derrida 1984:117). Or, in terms of *différance*:

> It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called "present" element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself. (Derrida 1982:13)

Although we might say, like Derrida, that the deconstruction of logocentrism is a search for 'the other of language' (Derrida 1984:123), deconstruction is not exclusively or primarily concerned with a linguistic problematic. The question of alterity is first and foremost the question of the concrete other, of 'the other, which is *beyond* language' (Derrida 1984:123; emph. added). Far, then, from being a nihilistic philosophy, a philosophy which -- according to its critics -- declares that there is nothing beyond language and that we are imprisoned in language, Derrida holds, that deconstruction is *not* 'an enclosure in nothingness', but that it is 'an openness towards the other' (Derrida 1984:124). More than 'just' an openness towards the other, deconstruction is a *response*.

> Deconstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it. Deconstruction is therefore vocation -- a response to a call. (Derrida 1984:118)

It is precisely on the issue of otherness that Derrida's writing demonstrates a strong affinity with that of the (Lithuanian-born) French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (with respect to whom Derrida says that he is prepared to agree with everything he says; see Derrida 1986b:74), whose work stands out as an unprecedented attempt in twentieth

century philosophy to articulate what it means to show respect for the other as what it is, namely: other. Levinas argues, that Western philosophy has been unable to recognize the alterity of the other because it understands the relation between man and world primarily as an *epistemological* relation, a relation where an isolated, self-present mind or ego attempts to get accurate knowledge of the external world. Levinas refers to this gesture of Western philosophy, in which the ego or subject is the origin of all knowledge and meaning, as *egology*. The main consequence of this epistemological preoccupation, is that the other can only appear as an object of knowledge. For something to be (or become) an object of knowledge, it has to be conceptualized, which means that it has to be identified as an instance of some general concept. But if the other is always thought as an instance of something more general and as the result of the ego's act of conceptualization, it can never appear in its 'radical alterity', it can never appear as 'absolutely-other', as unique and irreducible *singular*; it can never appear, in short, as what it is, namely: *other* (see Levinas 1979).

For Levinas this means that if we want to recognize the other in its alterity, we must radically reverse the philosophical order and take the encounter with the absolutely-other as our point of departure and not any ('ontological') determination of being. It is for precisely this reason that Levinas argues that ethics is 'first philosophy'. This reversal, as Derrida reveals very clearly in his essay on the thought of Levinas (Derrida, 1978:79-153), implies among other things, that we cannot say -- but also do not have to wonder -- *what* this encounter is.

> There is no way to conceptualize this encounter: it is made possible by the other, the unforeseeable "resistant to all categories." Concepts suppose an anticipation, a horizon within which alterity is amortized as soon as it is announced precisely because it has let itself be foreseen. The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognized. (Derrida 1978:95)

Thus, Derrida concludes, we are obliged 'to think in oppositions which we believed -- which we still cannot not believe -- to be the very ether of our thought and language' (Derrida 1978:95).

Although, as we have seen, Derrida is prepared to agree with everything Levinas says, to which he adds that the differences between them are of a biographical and not a

philosophical nature (Derrida 1986b:75), he does pose questions to Levinas, questions that precisely reveal why Derrida is *not* Levinas. The main issue he raises, is whether Levinas can consistently hold that the only way to do justice to the alterity of the other is by resisting conceptualization (of the other and of the encounter with the other). Derrida denies that this can be done. 'One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other', he argues, 'if there was not a *phenomenon* of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such' (Derrida 1978:123). To this necessity he refers as 'transcendental violence' (Derrida 1978:118-133). This is violence, because it presents the other as other, as the non-representable. It is transcendental because it is the very condition of possibility of any encounter with the other.

Levinas definitely wants to escape this predicament (see Bennington 1993:311). Derrida, in a by now familiar gesture, not only shows that Levinas' writing about the absolutely-other is already a betrayal of this desire (Derrida 1978:151). Even more crucial is the fact, that Derrida not only denies *along with* Levinas the pure, uncontaminated originality of the ego as self-presence, but also -- and this time *against* Levinas -- the pure, uncontaminated originality of the other.

Having arrived at this point -- although the point of deconstruction lies more in the crossing than in the arrival -- we only need to repeat the 'law of singularity,' the law of the inevitable dissingularization of the singular through the repetition without which it could not hope to secure its singularity (Gasché 1994:14-15). After all, if there is a point in Derrida's writing, it resides in the recognition that the singularity of the other requires a minimal universality to be itself and to be recognized as such, and that without the risk involved -- a risk that is both violent and necessary -- no justice can possibly be done to the singularity of the other (see Gasché 1994:16). It is against this background that we may begin to understand and appreciate Derrida's claim that 'deconstruction is justice' (Derrida 1992a:15).

4 Education

> Deconstruction has always had a bearing in principle on the apparatus and the function of teaching in general. (Derrida 1990b:118-119)

How then to translate Derrida in education?

It will by now be clear that, like with so many other questions evoked by Derrida's writing, there cannot be a straightforward answer to this question either. For all the reasons spelled out in this chapter, the adoption of deconstruction in education can by no means consist of the simple transmission of Derrida's ideas from the field of philosophy to the field of education. It would already be naive, to assume that everything that can be said about deconstruction is confined to the field of philosophy and would therefore be external to the field of education. If 'deconstruction is the case' (Derrida 1990a:85), then it is also always already the case within the 'field' of education -- which is in accordance with Derrida's contention about the bearing of deconstruction on 'the apparatus and the function of teaching in general' and maybe also with Edward Said's even more far-reaching claim that Derrida has nothing else *but* a pedagogy (see Ulmer 1985:157).

Although Derrida does not offer a ready-made theory of education -- let alone a 'programme' for educational practice -- his writing does offer important clues to rethink both the practice of education and our understanding of what education 'is'. (The latter question is as important as the former, because we should not make the mistake to think that we already know what education 'by itself' is.) One possible way to explore the pedagogical implications of Derrida's writing is by asking in what way and to what extent education and the way we conceive of it bears traces of logocentrism. Questions like this one have only recently come to the attention of educators. (See eg: Egéa-Kuehne 1995; Gregoriou 1995; Biesta 1995a; Masschelein & Wimmer 1996; Peters 1996; Standish 1996; Trifonas 1996; Egéa-Kuehne 1997; Biesta 1997; see also Crowley 1989; Pinar & Reynolds 1992.) I will not attempt to give an overview of this work, but will rather use this section to discuss one example of a pedagogical response to Derrida's writing. This should give an impression -- but not more than that -- of the possible significance of Derrida's work for education.

4.1 Education beyond representation: Gregory Ulmer's *post(e)-pedagogy*

One of the most elaborate attempts so far of a pedagogical translation of Derrida is Gregory Ulmer's *Applied Grammatology* (Ulmer 1985). In his book Ulmer develops a 'postmodernized pedagogy' under the heading of *grammatology*, which he introduces as an encompassing term for both 'deconstruction' and 'Writing' (Ulmer 1985:x). Ulmer

argues, that Derrida's writing contains two levels. On the one hand, there is a discursive level where deconstruction as 'a mode of analysis' has its place. On the other hand there is a *non*discursive level, to which Ulmer refers as 'Writing', which is not a method of analysis or criticism but of *invention* (Ulmer 1985:xii). In a sense -- that is in the traditional sense of writing which Derrida seeks to deconstruct -- this nondiscursive 'Writing' is imperceptible. It is not written as such, but can be found in a 'fully developed homonymic program' that (to Ulmer's 'surprise and astonishment') is at work in Derrida's writing, and in Derrida's use of images or models. Ulmer argues that this 'writing between the lines' (my term) -- and this resonates with what we have said about meaning, difference and *différance* -- is the ultimate deconstruction of the logocentric suppression of writing, as it does not 'analyze the inconsistency of offending theories' but constructs 'a fully operational mode of thought on the basis of the excluded elements' (Ulmer 1985:xii).

Given this reading of Derrida, it is not too difficult to understand why Ulmer's application of Derrida focuses on the question of the nature of the 'educational presentation' (Ulmer 1985:157). Traditionally, this presentation is understood in terms of *re*presentation. Derrida describes the 'semiotic logic' at work in this conception of teaching as follows.

> Teaching delivers signs ... more precisely signifiers supposing knowledge of a previous signified. Referred to this knowledge, the signifier is structurally second. (Derrida quoted in Ulmer 1985:163)

According to this logic, the teacher is a 'faithful transmitter' of some original. Or, to be more precise: of original true knowledge, discovered elsewhere and previously. Ulmer first of all reminds us, referring to the logic of the supplement, that there cannot be a faithful, that is neutral transmission, because 'simply stated -- every pedagogical exposition, just like every reading, adds something to what it transmits' (Ulmer 1985:162). As Derrida stresses, it is an illusion to think that one can look at a text without 'touching' it,

> without laying a hand on the "object", without risking -- which is the only chance of entering into the game, by getting a few fingers caught -- the addition of some new thread (Derrida 1981b:63).

The traditional way to escape this predicament -- which, in its most pure form, can for example be found in the tendency of progressive education to bring 'real life' into the

classroom -- is to replace representation by presentation. Or, in more familiar terms, to replace the signifier by the signified in its living presence (a tendency which Derrida also finds in the writings of Hegel, who seeks to solve the same predicament by 'a *presentation* of the concept by itself, in its own words, in its own voice, in its logos'; Derrida 1981b:31). According to Derrida, the 'effacement of language' that is implied in this solution, is the ideal of all teaching in its traditional form, 'and perhaps of all teaching whatever' (Derrida quoted in Ulmer 1985:168).

All this reveals, that logocentrism is both at work in the idea of education as a practice of representation, and in all attempts to 'compensate' for the representational character of education by presenting that which is represented. (The very notion or *re*presentation always already implies the full presence of what is represented, either as something that has happened in the past or as something that is yet to come. *Différance* expresses, among other things, that this moment of full presence will *always* be deferred.)

Ulmer's exposure of logocentrism in the traditional, that is representational conception of education is instructive for its own sake. But the more intriguing question of course is, what a pedagogy *beyond* logocentrism might look like. Ulmer develops his ideas under the name of *post(e)-pedagogy*, which is 'both a move beyond conventional pedagogy and a pedagogy for the age of electronic media (with *poste* meaning in this context television station or set)' (Ulmer 1985:157). Ulmer's argument (or my translation of it) runs broadly as follows.

As we have seen, the (logocentric) illusion of traditional teaching lies in the fact that it anticipates the full presence of what is represented. In order to keep this illusion alive, traditional teaching is forced to pretend that its own activities are neutral, accidental, and effaceable -- all in service of the anticipated full presence of that what is represented. According to Ulmer (following Derrida), it is precisely this construction of the 'scene of teaching' which creates the illusion of a 'transcendental signified' that governs the act of representation/teaching. In doing so, this scene of teaching encourages 'the undesirable pedagogical effect of discipleship'. According to Ulmer the 'new pedagogy' must attempt to do away with this effect, since 'the least thoughtful relationship to knowledge is discipleship' (Ulmer 1985:173).

From this point of view, it is not difficult to understand that Ulmer's 'new

pedagogy' amounts to a change of the *scene* of teaching, and not a change of its contents. Ulmer stresses that such a change of scene will definitely not lead to a non-representational pedagogy, as this would still be a logocentric 'pedagogy of presence' (Ulmer 1985:183). It will lead, on the contrary, to a pedagogy that is in a sense *more* representational than the pedagogy of representation, in that it is a pedagogy that does not attempt to efface what is at stake in the act of representation -- namely inscription, translation, and hence transformation. Of course, this is not the translation of an original. It is -- 'if this absurd expression may be risked' -- an *originary translation*, which means, that 'nonrepresentation is, thus, original representation' (Derrida 1978:237). This is, I believe, what Ulmer means when he says that what is needed in post(e)-pedagogy is 'a systematic *foregrounding* of the pedagogic effect itself' (Ulmer 1985:183; emph. added).

Although this change of scene is in itself an important step forward, we should keep in mind that it is not enough. The problem (of course) is, that the pedagogic effect cannot be articulated in a 'positive' way, that it cannot simply be 'presented' (compare the difficulties concerning the articulation of the 'meaning' of *différance*). Teachers cannot simply *say* that what is taught is not the truth. That is, they cannot say it without invoking the very order that post(e)-pedagogy seeks to deconstruct. This means that 'foregrounding' cannot be done straightforwardly, but has in some way to be 'located' on the nondiscursive level of 'Writing'. It has, in other words, to be *performed*.

It is for precisely this reason that Ulmer seeks a further development of post(e)-pedagogy along the lines of the presentational strategies in the seminars of the French psycho-analyst Jacques Lacan, in the performances of the German experimental artist Joseph Beuys, and in the films of the Russian film-director Sergei Eisenstein. For Ulmer, these are

> three examples of educational practice, each already fulfilling a major aspect of Writing, which indicate by their very existence, not to mention their extreme success, that applied grammatology is not simply an utopian ideal (Ulmer 1985:188).

I will not get into the details of Ulmer's post(e)-pedagogy. For the moment, it suffices to say that Ulmer's work stands as one example of both an answer to the question where we might find traces of logocentrism at work in (our understanding of) education, and how we may conceive of a pedagogy that moves 'beyond'.

5 Afterword: Education as the possibility of justice

In this chapter I have attempted to give an impression of what Derrida's writing is 'about'. Above all, I have tried to show that this writing is not the relativism or nihilism that some hold it to be, but that deconstruction has a distinct ethico-political 'horizon' -- a horizon that can be identified (although it does not have a positive identity) in terms of *justice*, where justice always addresses itself 'to the singularity of the other' (Derrida 1992a:20) and where it is always 'to come, *à venir*', that is an event which, 'as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth' (Derrida 1992a:27). Derrida acknowledges, that 'there are no doubt many reasons why the majority of texts hastily identified as "deconstructionist" ... seem, I do say *seem*, not to foreground the theme of justice (as theme, precisely), or the theme of ethics or politics' (Derrida 1992a:7). Yet, he holds that it was normal, foreseeable, and desirable that studies of deconstructive style should culminate in this problematic, and even that deconstruction has done nothing but address this problematic, if only 'obliquely', since 'one cannot speak *directly* about justice ... without immediately betraying justice' (Derrida 1992a:10).

The central role of this oblique commitment to justice, but also Derrida's call for 'politicization' (Derrida 1992a: 28; 1996:85), his contention that 'nothing seems ... less outdated than the classical emancipatory ideal' (Derrida 1992a:28), and his references to the 'duty' to work 'on the Enlightenment of this time' (Derrida 1992b:79), all may give the impression that Derrida's philosophy is rather close to the critical tradition (ie Marxism and the *Frankfurter Schule*). While there certainly are connections between this tradition and deconstruction (most explicitly explored in Derrida 1994), it is also important for Derrida to articulate a difference between deconstruction and a certain conception of critique.

As we have already seen, Derrida holds that deconstruction is not a critique 'in a general or a Kantian sense', ie understood as the application of an external criterion to a situation. Rather, 'the instance of *krinein* or of *krisis* (decision, choice, judgement, discernment) is itself ... one of the essential "themes" or "objects" of deconstruction' (Derrida 1971:273).

Deconstruction ... always aims at the trust confided in the critical, critico-

> theoretical agency, that is, the deciding agency, the ultimate possibility of the decidable; deconstruction is deconstruction of critical dogmatism.' (Derrida 1995:54)

Derrida stresses over and over again, that there is no safe ground upon which we can base our decisions, that there are no pure, uncontaminated (original) criteria that we can use for our judgements. At the basis of our decisions and judgements lies a radical *undecidability*, which cannot be closed off by our decisions or judgements, but which 'continues to inhabit the decision' (Derrida 1996:87; cf Gasché 1995).

Some would call this situation relativism and would call the ethico-political consequences that follow from it nihilism. This conclusion only follows, however, when one thinks that ethics and politics can only exist on some firm ground. Derrida argues, however, that ethics and politics only *begin* when this undecidability, which makes the decision at the very same time 'necessary and impossible', is acknowledged. For him, therefore, deconstruction is a 'hyper-politicization' (Derrida 1996:85; cf Biesta 1995b). Derrida acknowledges that this is an aporia -- but 'we must not hide it from ourselves' (Derrida 1992b:41).

> I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia. When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make; irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program. (...) It makes of action the applied consequence, the simple application of a knowledge or know-how. It makes of ethics and politics a technology. No longer of the order of practical reason or decision, it begins to be irresponsible. (Derrida 1992b:41,45)

Perhaps, Derrida adds, one never escapes the programme. But in that case 'one must acknowledge this and stop talking with authority about moral or political responsibility' (Derrida 1992b:41). This means, therefore, that

> the condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only *possible invention, the impossible invention*. (Derrida 1992b:41)

This, then, is the rationale for the contention that justice is an 'experience' of the undecidable (and hence that deconstruction *is* justice) -- an experience which always arises in relation to the singularity of the other (Derrida 1992a:20; cf Critchley 1996:34-35).

As long as we conceive of education in strictly functional terms, ie as the preparation for future participation in society, it will be difficult to see any connection between education, deconstruction and justice. As soon as we acknowledge, however, that the pedagogical experience is itself the experience of the undecidable, the experience of the ever new beginning without a ground, the experience of the 'secret' of singularity (cf Masschelein & Wimmer 1996), as soon as we acknowledge that in this 'fundamental' sense education is always literally *before* the law (cf Derrida 1992c; Biesta 1997), so that therefore the 'responsible response' that education is, is always a response *without norms*, we might begin to see that it is education itself that carries with it the infinite possibility of justice.

ENDNOTE

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